

**Friends of the River ~ The Wilderness Society
California Wilderness Coalition ~ Sierra Club**

Reply to: Friends of the River, 915 20th Street, Sacramento, CA 95814

February 19, 1999

Robert Beehler
Hollister Resource Area Manager
Bureau of Land Management
20 Hamilton Court
Hollister, CA 95023

Re: Panoche Hills South WSA & Panoche/Coalinga ACEC

Dear Mr. Beehler:

The joint federal and state water resources program known as the CALFED Bay Delta Program has identified 14 surface water storage sites in the Central Valley that may be suitable for increasing the state's water supply reliability (CALFED revised Phase II report, December 1998). One of the 14 sites identified by CALFED is the "Panoche Reservoir." Preliminary research indicates that the Panoche Reservoir project may inundate public lands in the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Hollister Resource Area in Fresno County. These public lands include portions of the Panoche Hills South Wilderness Study Area (WSA) and Panoche/Coalinga Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC).

Although little information is currently available concerning CALFED's Panoche Reservoir project, the site would be used to store water diverted from the California Aqueduct. According to previous studies by the California Department of Water Resources, the Panoche Reservoir site could store from 160,000 to 3.1 million acre feet of water, depending on the specific size and location of the dam. Whatever its size, the dam and reservoir would inundate significant portions of the Panoche Creek and Silver Creek drainages, and the larger reservoir configurations would almost certainly flood the southern portions of the Panoche Hills South WSA.

In addition, the dam and reservoir would drown public lands in the watershed that are included in the Panoche/Coalinga ACEC. The ACEC was established by the BLM to protect critical habitat for sensitive, threatened, and endangered wildlife species, including the San Joaquin kit fox, blunt-nosed leopard lizard, giant kangaroo rat, and San Joaquin antelope squirrel. The ACEC is also intended to protect several rare plant species, as well as important paleontological values.

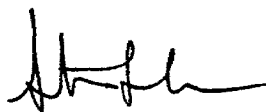
The BLM must engage the CALFED agencies to ensure the protection of the WSA and the ACEC from possible inundation by the reservoir, as well as from the dam's

and reservoir's indirect impacts on wildlife migration. As you know, Section 603(c) of the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act requires the BLM to protect the wilderness character and suitability of the WSA until Congress acts on the agency's recommendation for the area. Obviously the flooding of portions of the WSA would seriously damage the area's wilderness character, as well as the natural values that prompted the designation of the area as an ACEC.

We request that the BLM take immediate action to ensure that the CALFED program recognizes the federally protected natural values of the Panoche Hills South WSA and Panoche/Coalinga ACEC.

We look forward to working with you to ensure the protection of this wild and special area from the destructive impacts of a reservoir.

Sincerely,



Steven L. Evans
Conservation Director
Friends of the River

Louis Blumberg / SLE

Louis Blumberg
Assistant Regional Director
The Wilderness Society

Paul Spitzer / SLE

Paul Spitzer
Executive Director
California Wilderness Coalition

Vicky Hoover / SLE

Vicky Hoover
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Cc: BLM State Director Ed Hastey
BLM State Wilderness Coordinator Paul Brink
CALFED Director Lester Snow
Senator Barbara Boxer
Senator Dianne Feinstein
Representative George Miller